

6. APOSTOLIC CHURCH TRADITIONS

Introduction: You've heard of Star Wars. Today we're going to discuss worship wars! Paul, in **Colossians 2:23**, warned against "self-made religion." Any sincere believer wants to worship God in spirit and in truth. Obviously, we would do well to be wary of man-made religion. Christians have taken three approaches: **1)** what we can do, **2)** what we can't do, and **3)** what we should do when we gather together (church practice):

a) "Can Do": This approach, held to by Catholics, Lutherans, and Anglicans, teaches that we should do what is prescribed, and that it is permissible to add extra-biblical aids to worship.¹ This approach is characterized by "smells and bells", and emphasizes a sensory experience (smells has to do with the use of incense, and bells has to do with ringing bells during various parts of the eucharist). Other extra-biblical activities might include genuflecting, clerical vestments, icons, statues, processions, and elaborate ceremonies.² In short, if not prohibited by Scripture, it can be incorporated into a church meeting.

*Do what is commanded by Scripture, and unless prohibited by Scripture, you can add it to worship.*³

b) "Can't Do": Many Protestants (Presbyterians, Puritans, Baptists) sought to apply the Reformation doctrine of *sola scriptura* to ecclesiology. Their approach is called the Regulative Principle of Worship: worship should be strictly regulated by God's Word; anything beyond Scripture is man-made worship. This is the belief that it is not permissible to do anything in church unless it was been specifically prescribed in the New Testament. What we do in church meetings must be limited to God's will as revealed by God's Word. We are to worship only in God's prescribed way. Thus, a church meeting should consist only of singing, prayer, Scripture reading, teaching, and the Lord's Supper. Adding anything else is wrong.

Second London Baptist Confession (1689): "The acceptable way of worshipping the true God, is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imagination and devices of men ... or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures."⁴

Do what is commanded by Scripture, but if something is not commanded, you cannot add it to worship.

¹ This has been labeled as the normative principle of worship.

² Scott Aniol, "The Reformation of Worship", G3min.org. Accessed 06/01/2024.

³ This is known as the normative principle of worship.

⁴ 22.1

c) **“Should Do”**: This approach concerns the normal practice of the New Testament church. It posits that all the church-practice traditions of the apostles should be normative today. Not only should we obey what is commanded, but we should also follow normal biblical precedent. Apostolic description is prescription. Fee and Stuart, in *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, stated that the typical way for Christians to understand the history of the early church is as a normative model for the church of all times (the authors saw this as a problem).⁵

Do not only what is commanded by Scripture, but also what was modeled or practiced by the first-century church.

Examples: If they met on Sunday, we should meet on Sunday. If they only baptized believers by immersion, so should we. If they separated God and government, so should we. If they celebrated the Lord’s Supper every week and as actual meal, so should we. If they had a principle of participation in their meetings, so should we. If they adopted a particular form of church government, so should we.

Jim Elliot (missionary martyr): “The pivot point hangs on whether or not God has revealed a universal pattern for the church in the New Testament. If He has not, then anything will do so long as it works. But I am convinced that nothing so dear to the heart of Christ as His Bride should be left without explicit instructions as to her corporate conduct. I am further convinced that the 20th century has in no way simulated this pattern in its method of ‘churching’ a community ... it is incumbent upon me, if God has a pattern for the church, to find and establish that pattern, at all costs.”⁶

With this approach, there are really only two ways to “do” church: **1)** The way the apostles originally did it, versus **2)** some other way. Most church leaders throughout history seem to have concluded that traditions of the apostles are not all that important. Consequently, they feel free to adopt whatever church model seems good, even if it violates those traditions.

Premise: Jesus equipped the first-century church with an ecclesiology designed to help Christians obey all that He commanded. The Apostles modeled these practices for us in the way they set up churches. Therefore, adopting the ecclesiology of the Apostles better allows the Spirit to create love, unity, community, and commitment in a body of believers. Not merely described, apostolic church traditions are actually prescribed.

I. Practicing Apostolic Traditions is Praiseworthy

******In 1 Corinthians 11:2, Paul expressed praise for the church. Why did he commend them?** He praised them because they held to his traditions. As we shall see, the church was under pressure to depart from what Paul had modeled for them (11:16).

⁵ Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4th edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 112.

⁶ Elizabeth Elliot, *Shadow of The Almighty: Life and Testimony of Jim Elliot* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 138-139.

ESV **1 Corinthians 11:2** I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you.

1. When Paul wrote “everything” (1Co 11:2), what subject matter did he have in mind (what is the context)? See *1 Corinthians 11-14*. 1 Corinthians 11-14 is a four-chapter section on Paul’s traditions regarding church practice.⁷

2. In general, what is the difference between a tradition (1 Co 11:2) and a teaching? The Greek word for “teaching” is *didaché* (basis for “didactic”), and means something that is taught. **Example:**

NAS **Acts 2:42** they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching (*didaché*) ...

The word “traditions” (**11:2**) is from *paradosis*; “that which is handed down” (be it information or custom).⁸ It is an inherited pattern of action or thought. A tradition can be either handed-down **a)** information or **b)** custom.

a) Information: *Paradosis* can refer to a teaching that is passed on:

ESV **1 Corinthians 15:3** For I delivered to you ... what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures ...

b) Custom: In his commentary on 1 Corinthians, **Gordon Fee** pointed out that although the Greek word for tradition, *paradosis*, is “a technical term in Judaism for oral transmission of religious instruction. In this case it almost certainly does not refer to ‘teachings’ (as it does in **15:3**), but to the ‘traditions’ that have to do with worship.”⁹

This same Greek word *paradosis* (in verb form) is used in **1 Corinthians 11:23** in regard to the tradition of the Lord’s Supper (that it was “passed on”):

NIV **1 Corinthians 11:23** I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you ...

What words in 11:2 indicate how meticulous they were in following Paul’s traditions? The words “even as” (*kathos*) indicate about the degree to which they maintained Paul’s traditions. Paul praised them for holding to his traditions “just as” (NIV) he passed them on. They adhered to every iota; it was sort of a photocopy effect! The apostles evidently designed for the churches to mimic the traditions (inherited patterns) that they had established.

⁷ The immediate topic was heading coverings.

⁸ Rienecker, *Linguistic Key*, 423. See also Bauer, *Lexicon*, 615.

⁹ Gordon Fee, “Corinthians,” 499.

3. Why is it significant that the word “traditions” (11:2) is plural? That the word “traditions” is plural means that Paul had in mind more than the one tradition dealt with in 1 Corinthians 11a (head coverings). He was pleased that the church held to all of his traditions for church practice (such as the Lord’s Supper, and participatory meetings).

4. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for holding to the tradition of the elders (Mk 7:13). Yet in 1 Corinthians 11:2, Paul praised the Corinthians for holding traditions. What was the difference? The Pharisees wrongly elevated man-made historical tradition over the direct commands of God:

NIV **Mark 7:13** ... you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down.

In contrast, apostolic traditions helped the Corinthians live out the teachings of Jesus.

5. Why is it important to distinguish between New Testament apostolic tradition and post-New Testament, historical church tradition? J.L. Dagg pointed out that it is our privilege to leave the muddied water of church history and drink at the pure spring water of inspired New Testament writing.¹⁰ Thus, we are *not* advocating the alleged apostolic tradition found in church history as claimed by Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. Instead, we promote *only* those apostolic traditions that can be found in the pages of the New Testament.

6. What application would 1 Corinthians 11:2 hold for churches today (1Co 11:2)? If Paul praised the Corinthian church for holding to his traditions, he likely would be pleased if our churches today held to them also.

Example: Mosaic legislation largely consisted of case law. It is paradigmatic. Only a few examples were cited, and the Israelites were expected to apply the principles to all other areas. For instance, the corners of wheat fields were to be left for the poor. Nothing was said about fig orchards. However, fig orchard owners were expected to do the same. Arguably, Adherence to apostolic tradition is also paradigmatic in nature. If we observe that the apostles were pleased when churches followed specific traditions, then we are expected to apply that example to other patterns we see modeled by the apostles in their establishment of churches.

Roger Williams: Williams planted the first-ever Baptist church in North America (1600s). He believed that churches should strive for as near approximate as possible to New Testament forms. This belief led Williams to resign as an Anglican clergyman and also to found the colony of Rhode Island on the New Testament pattern of a separation between church and state (and liberty of conscience).¹¹

¹⁰ Dagg, *Church Order*, 84.

¹¹ Edwin Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 106.

II. Practicing Apostolic Traditions was Expected

****In 1 Corinthians 11:16, how did Paul quiet anyone contending against his church-practice traditions? Just to realize that one was “different” from all the other churches was argument enough to silence opposition.¹²

ESV 1 Corinthians 11:16 If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.

• “practice” (11:16): From *sunétheia*, custom, habit, usage.¹³

7. What does 1 Corinthians 11:16 suggest about uniformity of practice in all churches? See also 1 Corinthians 11:34b, Titus 1:5. All churches followed the same apostolic church practices.

KJV 1 Corinthians 11:34b The rest I will set in order when I come ...” (underling mine)

ESV Titus 1:5a ... I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order ...

There was obviously a definite order, pattern, or tradition that was followed in organizing first-century churches. It was not left up to each individual church to find its own way of doing things.

Franchise: Those who manage a McDonald’s franchise have little choice as to how the restaurant will be operated. They do not have the liberty of selling extra items, of designing their own building, setting their own prices, cooking the food a different way, etc. This same approach should be followed in how we set up and operate our churches.

****Based on 1 Corinthians 14:33b-34, what was true in all the congregations?

ESV 1 Corinthians 14:33b-34 As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches.

8. What does 1 Corinthians 14:33b-34 reveal about uniformity of practice in New Testament church meetings? Without dealing here with this passage’s specific meaning, notice how Paul again appealed to a universal pattern that existed in all the churches as a basis for conformity.¹⁴

¹² There is a presentation on head coverings at NTRF.org.

¹³ Bauer, *Lexicon*, 789.

¹⁴ There is a presentation on women’s silence at NTRF.org

******What is the answer to each of the two questions in 1 Corinthians 14:36?** The word of God did not originate in the church in Corinth, nor were they the only church it had reached.

ESV **1 Corinthians 14:36** Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached?

The congregation already knew the answer to these two questions (1Co 14:36). What would have caused Paul to ask these two questions (1Co 14:36)? The problem was evidently that there was pressure to deviate from the tradition of the apostles in their church practice.

What statement was Paul making with these two questions (1Co 14:36)? The church wanted to do something differently than what all the other churches were doing. The questions make the point that the church in Corinth had no authority to deviate from the church traditions that Paul modeled for them.

9. How do Paul's questions in 1 Corinthians 14:36 show that uniformity was expected among New Testament churches? Evidently all the churches were expected to follow the same patterns in their ecclesiology. The Corinthian church was to stay in line.

E.H. Broadbent (undercover English missionary to closed nations): "Events in the history of the churches in the time of the apostles have been selected and recorded in the Book of Acts in such a way as to provide a permanent pattern for the churches. Departure from this pattern has had disastrous consequences, and all revival and restoration have been due to some return to the pattern and principles in the Scriptures."¹⁵

III. Practicing Apostolic Traditions is Commanded

******10. What were the Thessalonians commanded to do (2Th 2:15)?** They were commanded to follow apostolic traditions. This is the same Greek word, *paradosis*, used in **1 Corinthians 11:2** ("traditions"). Many believers feel that while apostolic traditions are interesting, following them is never commanded. This, however, is not the case. This constitutes divine direction.

ESV **2 Thessalonians 2:15** ... stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

11. Based on the overall context, to what "traditions" does 2 Thessalonians 2:15 refer? The overall context of 2 Thessalonians 2 refers to *teaching* traditions for eschatology, not ecclesiology.

¹⁵ E.H. Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church*, (Grand Rapids: Gospel Folio Press 1999), 26.

12. Why is it significant that “traditions” is plural (2Th 2:15)? It reveals that the author clearly had more in view than merely the one tradition about eschatology. The command here in **2:15** applies to all their traditions, including traditions regarding ecclesiology, as patterned in the New Testament.

Application: Today we do not have any apostolic information received by mouth, but we do have their letters. We are to hold to the traditions found in those letters. This would include both their theology and their practice.

******What “tradition” did the apostles pass on in 2 Thessalonians 3:6?** The specific tradition was gainful employment versus idleness. However, the overall principle still holds true: the apostles generally wanted the churches to follow, to hold to, to mimic, their traditions (in work ethics, end time events, and church practice).

ESV **2 Thessalonians 3:6** ... keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.

A.W. Tozer (CMA pastor): “The temptation to introduce “new” things into the work of God has always been too strong for some people to resist. The Church has suffered untold injury at the hands of well-intentioned but misguided persons, who have felt that they know more about running God’s work, than Christ and His apostles did! A solid train of boxcars would not suffice to haul away the religious truck which has been brought into the service of the Church with the hope of improving on the original pattern. These things have been, one and all, great hindrances to the progress of the Truth, and have so altered the divinely planned structure that the apostles, were they to return to earth today, would scarcely recognize the misshapen thing which has resulted!”¹⁶

13. What gave the apostles authority to establish traditions that all churches still are obliged to follow? See *John 13:20, 15:20, Acts 1:1-3, 2:42*. The apostles were handpicked by Jesus to uniquely represent Him in a way that no one since ever has. To reject the teachings of the Twelve was to reject the teachings of Jesus.

IV. Practicing Apostolic Traditions is Logical

An axiom of industrial design is that “form follows function.” What does that mean? It means the shape (form) of an object should relate directly to its intended purpose (function). In other words, what something looks like should be determined by what it is supposed to do.

In matters of faith, this is similar to the idea that belief determines behavior, or that doctrine determines duty.

¹⁶ Robert Crosby, “A.W. Tozer on The Holy Spirit & Today’s Church,” Patheos.com. Accessed 10/16/2016.

14. How would the industrial design axiom that *form follows function* apply to the apostles' church-practice traditions? The apostles' beliefs about the **function** of the church would naturally have affected the way they organized churches (the **form** of the church). Thus, we argue that the function of a New Testament church is best carried out by the New Testament form of the church. It makes logical sense to do church the way the apostles originally set it up.

J. L. Dagg (Early Southern Baptist theologian, president of Mercer University): "they (the Apostles) have taught us by example how to organize and govern churches. We have no right to reject their instruction and captiously insist that nothing but positive command shall bind us. Instead of choosing to walk in a way of our own devising, we should take pleasure to walk in the footsteps of those holy men from whom we have received the word of life ... respect for the Spirit by which they were led should induce us to prefer their modes of organization and government to such as our inferior wisdom might suggest."¹⁷

V. Practicing Apostolic Traditions Brings God's Peaceful Presence

******According to Philippians 4:9 how can a church enjoy God's peaceful presence?** The Philippians were to put into practice "whatever" (NIV) they learned, received, heard or saw from Paul.

ESV **Philippians 4:9** What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

15. How might Philippians 4:9 be applied with respect to Paul's church practices? The general context of Philippians 4:9 is not ecclesiology. However, by extension this would also include the way we learned, heard, or saw that Paul organized churches.

Watchman Nee (Chinese church planter): "Acts is the 'genesis' of the church's history, and the Church in the time of Paul is the 'genesis' of the Spirit's work ... we must return to 'the beginning.' Only what God has set forth as our example in the beginning is the eternal Will of God. It is the Divine standard and our pattern for all time ... God has revealed His Will, not only by giving orders, but by having certain things done in His church, so that in the ages to come others might simply look at the pattern and know His will."¹⁸

So What?

16. What conclusion can be draw about God's desire for the modern church to practice apostolic traditions?

1. God directs by **patterns** (traditions) as well as by precept (teaching). We should both what is commanded and what is patterned.
2. Apostolic ecclesiology is **generally applicable** for the church in all ages.
3. Apostolic traditions are **consistent** with apostolic teachings.
4. Holding to apostolic traditions is both **praised and commanded**.

¹⁷ J.L. Dagg, *Treatise on Church Order* (Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1990), 84.

¹⁸ Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life* (Colorado Springs: International Students Press, 1969), 8-9.

The question is not: “Do we *have* to do things the way they were done in the New Testament?” The question is: “Why would we want to do things any other way?!” The burden of explanation ought to fall upon those who deviate from New Testament patterns, not upon those who seek to keep them. Baptists already keep some New Testament traditions (believer’s baptism by immersion, the separation of church and state, meeting for church on the Lord’s Day); we argue for a consistency.

Apostolic traditions for church practice often neglected today:

1. The Lord’s Supper celebrated as a weekly fellowship feast.
2. Participatory church meetings.
3. A plurality of servant leaders who take the time to build congregational consensus.
4. Intentionally smaller Churches (Roma-villa sized churches).

There is general consensus in scholarly circles, regardless of denomination, as to how the early church functioned. **What should we make of the fact that there is general scholarly consensus regarding the actual practice of the early church?** This consensus helps us to determine which basic practices were unquestionable parts of apostolic tradition.

Alignment Example: A car with its front end out of alignment will still take its driver where he wants to go, but at the price of prematurely worn and damaged tires. Similarly, a church that neglects apostolic patterns is still a church, and much good can come through it, but at a price. Damage is being done. Blessings are being missed. More significantly, people may be hurt, damaged, worn out.

Caution: It is possible to be as straight as a gun barrel theologically, but just as empty. Our focus is not on a dry, rote reconstruction of early church practice, but on living out the examples left to us by the apostles in the power and leading of the Holy Spirit. Without **Christ at the center** of things, the patterns become legalism and death, a hollow form, an empty shell. Jesus must be the center of a church or none of this will work anyway. It would blow apart! As He said, “Apart from Me you can do nothing.”

Readily found are discarded empty bottles. A bottle, without its contents, is nearly worthless. What people buy is what is inside the bottle. Yet once you have the beverage, it must go into something. The container takes on importance because of its contents. The container can impact the enjoyment of the contents. For example, *why do wine connoisseurs never drink their wine out of Dixie cups?* It is much better to use a wine glass. So too, Jesus said not to put new wine in an old wineskin! If the new wine could be compared to our new lives in Christ, then the wineskin might be compared to how we structure and organize church. We need the proper wine skin, but more importantly we need the wine. Both have their place. Either one without the other is problematic. We need both motive and model.

**** = Ask this question before having someone read the text aloud; it introduces a new passage of Scripture.

Next Lesson: E-mail the next set of discussion questions out to the class (or print them up and hand them out at the end of this lesson). Ask them to consider the issues, answer the questions and be prepared to discuss them at the next meeting.

Teacher Preparation: At NTRF.org you'll find an article, mp3 and video on this topic.

Stephen E. Atkerson
NTRF.org
Revised 06/02/2024



— Background Material for Depth —

Exception Clause: Are there ever good reasons for going against New Testament pattern? Yes, we believe that there are. Just as Jesus revealed that the Sabbath is made for man and not man for the Sabbath, so also the examples found in the New Testament are there for the sake of the church, not vice versa. Moses told the Jews to observe a Saturday Sabbath; violating that command was a capital offense. Yet Jesus said it was always appropriate to do good on the Sabbath. If your ox is in ditch, it is acceptable to work on the Sabbath in order to get the ox out; so too with New Testament patterns. We are generally to keep the patterns laid down by the apostles.

Caution #1: Beware of making patterns out of **silence**. Some feel that not only must we follow New Testament patterns, but we that we also do not have the freedom to do anything that was not done by the early church. They believe that if a practice is not found in the New Testament, then we can't do it; it is forbidden. For instance, if the New Testament is silent about using musical instruments, then we must not use them. We disagree with this approach. **First**, the lack of mention of a practice is not proof that the early church did not practice it! **Second**, this negative approach is essentially a form of legalism and leads easily to a critical and judgmental spirit toward others. Instead of seeking to positively follow what clearly are New Testament patterns, advocates of this negative hermeneutic are known for all the things that they are against (anti-this, anti-that). **Third**, if this is the right approach, then why did Jesus participate in the festival of Hanukkah and synagogue system, both of which were extra-biblical, inter-testament historical developments?

Caution #2: Beware of developing an attitude of **pride or legalism**. Darryl Erkel has pointed out the “danger of making distinctive New Testament patterns a form of legalism wherein we begin to look down or distance ourselves from our fellow brothers because they don't quite do it the way that we think it should be done. We should always be careful to not give the impression to others that their church is false or that God can't use their church because they're not following apostolic patterns as closely as we are. That is nothing but sheer pride! On the other hand, we ought to look for opportunities to respectfully and tactfully demonstrate that there is a better way—one which is more conducive to the spiritual growth of God's people—for the **function** of the New Testament church is best carried out by the New Testament **form** of the church!” Further, Jesus pointed out that man is made for the Sabbath, not the Sabbath for man. His point was that there were justified reasons for breaking the Sabbath (an ox in the ditch, doing acts of mercy, the work of the priests). The same would hold true for apostolic traditions. Apostolic traditions were made for the church, not the church for apostolic traditions!

The Roman world is gone forever. What is the difference between holding to apostolic traditions and mindlessly copying everything seen in the New Testament (wearing sandals, writing on parchment, studying by oil lamps, wearing togas, etc.)? Following New Testament patterns does not mean blindly attempting to recreate Roman culture (like wearing togas, writing on parchment, lighting by oil lamps, etc.). The issue here is church practice. There should be obvious reasons behind the practices being followed.

Beware of making patterns out of things that are onetime events. The Christian communalism of Acts 6 was a onetime event for a single church. It is an option for any believers of any age, but it is neither a command nor a New Testament pattern. The same could be said of Paul's vow in Acts not to cut his hair. One indicator is to focus in on New Testament religious practices, especially (but not only) those that went against the culture of their day.

For instance, if the Romans had electric lighting and if instead of using electric lights the Christians lit their meetings by oil lamps, then that should get our attention! By way of contrast, there was nothing religious nor out of the ordinary in wearing togas, so there is no need for us to do so today.

Another example would be the use of guitars in modern meetings; since they did not use them in New Testament times, does this mean that we should not either? Since guitars were not yet invented, the real question is whether they used instruments at all. The word for "psalm" is *psalmos* and means "song of praise"; the original meaning of *psallo* was "pluck, play" (a stringed instrument), a meaning that persisted into the second century A.D.¹⁹ If instruments were not used in New Testament church meetings, then arguably they went against their culture in not using them and thus neither should we. If, however, instruments were used, then a guitar would be perfectly acceptable today.

Jesus washed His disciples' feet. The Jerusalem church practiced communalism. How can we determine what is and is not an apostolic tradition? The tradition of the Twelve will: **1)** originate from the original twelve apostles, **2)** apply to all New Testament churches, **3)** cross cultural boundaries & transcend language differences, and **4)** have a reasonable, obvious theological purpose (it is not mindless aping).

Some think it folly to try to recreate the "primitive" first-century church, since it was far from perfect. They assert that God expected His church to mature, to grow up, beyond the infancy stage. As much as anything, early believers are seen as examples of how *not* to function as a church. Besides, they argue, it is impossible to behave exactly like the first century church since we no longer have the original apostles with us. How would you respond to this argument?

How can the concerns expressed by the following quote be overcome? "I believe that there are potential problems in too-rigidly trying to mirror New Testament practice. As I see it, we risk 'majoring in the minors' despite the best of intentions...."

Why are historical church traditions so often given preference over New Testament historical traditions?

¹⁹ Bauer, *Lexicon*, 891.